When people ask “What’s the oldest tree growing at the Arnold Arboretum?” they’re usually surprised to learn that it’s a 276-year-old compact hinoki cypress (Chamaecyparis obtusa ‘Chabo-hiba’, accession 877-37) that stands only four feet tall. It is one of seven ‘Chabo-hiba’ specimens in the Larz Anderson Bonsai Collection that were imported from Yokohama, Japan in 1913. This makes 2013 a milestone for the tree—the hundredth anniversary of its arrival (and survival) in North America. It makes my head spin to think that someone has been watering this plant pretty much every day since well before the American Revolution! While this ‘Chabo-hiba’ is not the oldest Japanese bonsai in the United States (there are older ones at the United States National Arboretum in Washington, D.C.), the Arboretum’s plant has been under continuous cultivation longer than any other bonsai growing in North America.

Larz Anderson attended Harvard College (class of 1888) and later served as a diplomat in the Foreign Service. In 1912, near the end of the Taft administration, he was appointed “Ambassador extraordinary” to Japan, a post he held for only six months, until Woodrow Wilson moved into the White House. During his brief stay, Anderson was smitten by the “bonsai bug,” and in early 1913, shortly before completing his posting, he purchased at least forty plants from the Yokohama Nursery Company to bring back to his estate in Brookline, Massachusetts. Many of the specimens offered for sale by the nursery were already hundreds of years old. Photographs from the time show that the ‘Chabo-Hiba’ plants were often trained into a conical shape—suggestive of a distant mountain—with regularly arranged, horizontal branches.

Anderson and his wife Isabel (Weld) left Japan on March 6, 1913, and it seems likely that the plants followed them across the ocean in a shipment that autumn. Once they arrived, the trees were displayed on the terraces of the Anderson home where they resided for nearly twenty-five years.

The collection was donated to the Arboretum in two batches, initially in 1937 following Larz’s death, and later in 1948, following Isabel’s death. ‘Chabo-hiba’ 877-37 came to the Arboretum in the first installment and was put on display along with the other plants in a lath-house on the grounds of the former Bussey Institution. They remained there until 1962 when they moved into their current hexagonal home near the Dana Greenhouses.

In 1969 the Arboretum appointed Connie Derderian to take care of the plants. As honorary curator, Connie revitalized the collection after years of neglect and took care of the plants until 1984. Having worked as Connie’s apprentice since 1979, I became the new curator the year she retired. In 1998, the noted English bonsai master, Colin Lewis, became involved with the collection.

The fact that seven large ‘Chabo-hibas’ have survived the ravages of both time and occasional neglect for the past hundred years is a testament to the incredible durability of the plants themselves. By virtue of their longevity, the plants provide a direct link not only to the early 1900s, when wealthy Americans were passionately collecting cultural artifacts from Asia, but also to the Tokugawa era in Japan (1600 to 1868) when shoguns ruled the land and the plants themselves occupied places of honor in temples throughout the country.

The hinoki cypress cultivar name chabo-hiba is not widely used in Japan today, and it took some effort to uncover its history and meaning. The word hiba is the common name for the arborvitae-like conifer Thujopsis dolobrata and means “hatchet-shaped,” in reference to the scale-like foliage of the plant. Chabo means bantam or dwarf chicken, and when combined with hiba means “compact or dwarf cypress.” In the landscape, Chamaecyparis obtusa ‘Chabo-hiba’ is a relatively slow-growing plant that develops a pyramidal shape when left unpruned. When grown in a container and intensively pruned, it produces congested, planar foliage and contorted horizontal branches, resulting in striking bonsai specimens like accession 877-37.

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Selected specimens from the Larz Anderson Bonsai Collection will be on display at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston from October 2nd to 13th, 2013.